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Webber, Valerie; Brunger, Fern

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## Assessing Risk to Researchers: Using the Case of Sexuality Research to Inform Research Ethics Board Guidelines

*Valerie Webber & Fern Brunger*

**Key words:** IRB;  
research ethics  
committees; risk;  
researcher risk;  
sexuality studies;  
sex exceptionalism

**Abstract:** Research Ethics Boards (REBs) typically focus on ensuring the safety of participants. Increasingly, the risk that research poses to researchers is also discussed. Should REBs involve themselves in determining the degree of allowable researcher risk, and if so, upon what should they base that assessment? The evaluation of researcher safety does not appear to be standardized in any national REB protocols. The implications of REB review of researcher risks remain undertheorized. With a critical queer framework, we use the example of sexuality research to illustrate problems that could arise if researcher risk is assessed. We concentrate on two core research ethics guidelines: 1. How research risk compares to the risks of everyday life. 2. How potential harms compare to the anticipated research benefits. Some argue that sexuality research is more deeply scrutinized than research in other fields, viewed as inherently risky for both participants and researchers. The example of sexuality research helps make explicit the moral undertones of procedural ethics. With these moral undertones in mind, we argue that if adopted, researcher risk guidelines should be the purview of pedagogical relationships or workplace safety requirements, not REBs. Any risk training should be universally required regardless of the research area.

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## 1. Introduction

It is well understood that conducting research entails a wide variety of risks. Research Ethics Boards (REBs) typically concern themselves with ensuring the safety of participants. Research may also pose physical, emotional, psychological, and professional risks to researchers (DICKSON-SWIFT, JAMES, KIPPEN & LIAMPUTTONG, 2008; LEE-TREWEEK & LINKOGLE, 2000a). Risky research<sup>1</sup> has been examined as a *methodological* issue within the social sciences for some time, particularly in the context of participant-observation

1 The phrase "risky research" will be used in this article to refer to research that poses risks to researchers.

research undertaken in active war zones, among members of criminal organizations, or on "sensitive" subject matter such as domestic abuse. Risky research is less often examined from the perspective of research ethics, but REBs increasingly recognize the potential for researcher risk and they involve themselves in the evaluation of researcher safety to varying degrees (e.g., BLOOR, FINCHAM & SAMPSON, 2007; DICKSON-SWIFT, JAMES & KIPPEN, 2005; TCPS2, 2014). The role of REBs in this regard is far from standardized, and the implications of such involvement remain undertheorized. Our aim in this article is to thoughtfully consider the implications of having REBs include risks to researchers as part of the task of ethics review. We write from a Canadian context; however, this issue will be of relevance to researchers and research ethics bodies everywhere. [1]

Guidance on assessing risks to *participants* of research is thorough, considered in relation to the riskiness of everyday life and in relation to the potential benefits of research to individual participants and to society. Despite the emphasis placed upon it, assessing risks to participants is by no means an uncomplicated or uncontested practice. Risk is simply the probability that an event will occur. In the research ethics framework, however, risk is always understood as a risk of harm, and harm is always understood as something that needs to be managed. We question the automatic linkage of risk to harm, and of harm to that which is undesirable: "harms" are not always understood as such by those involved in the research, and are not always unwanted. Failure to concede this fact leads to several problems when assessing risk to participants. Potential participants are generally excluded from the process of preemptive risk assessment, which is highly subjective to begin with (BAHN & WEATHERILL, 2013). The accepted wisdom and standard protocols of research ethics—especially in regards to "vulnerable" populations—are therefore often based on biased and under-informed assumptions about participant populations, undermining the development of truly respectful practice and ultimately doing a disservice to the communities under study (BELL & SALMON, 2012). Determining in advance the risk research poses to participants can be viewed as a paternalistic and colonialist practice that overrides participant self-determination and fails to account for the nuance of how risk is interpreted and negotiated, both individually and by communities (BRUNGER & RUSSEL, 2015; BRUNGER & WEIJER, 2007; GUSTAFSON & BRUNGER, 2014). Further, inflated and inflexible risk assessments may hinder the full and desired acknowledgment of participants' contributions (BRADLEY, 2007; ELWOOD, 2007). [2]

Given these misgivings around how risk to participants, and research risk more generally, is conceptualized, can, or should, the same guidance be applied to an assessment of risks to researchers? Should REBs involve themselves in determining what degree of risk is allowable for a researcher, and if so, upon what should they base that assessment? [3]

REBs do not (yet) appear to be routinely involved in assessing researcher risk. We think it valuable to discuss some potential concerns that we foresee should they begin doing so using the same criteria as they do to assess participant risk.

Participatory sexuality research is a useful case for examining the problematic nature of assessing research in terms of how the risks of a particular project compare to the risks that the researcher "normally" encounters or seeks out, or how those risks are weighed against potential research benefits. What are the implications of applying this logic to the researching of sexual acts, cultures, and venues? What moral claims are embedded in defining acceptable sexual risk for a researcher? In reflecting upon our experience engaging in sexuality research, including WEBBER's participant-observation at sex parties<sup>2</sup> and BDSM<sup>3</sup> events, we employ the example of sexuality research to illustrate concerns that could arise if researcher risk is assessed, focusing on two core research ethics guidelines: 1. How research risk compares to the risks inherent in everyday life. 2. How potential harms compare to the anticipated benefits of the research. [4]

We will begin by outlining the concerns raised regarding the risks that research may pose to researchers (Section 2). We then discuss the roots of sex exceptionalism and how this may manifest in perceptions of risk and REB practice (Section 3). Next, we use examples from sexuality research to illustrate potential ethical dilemmas that could arise in reviewing researcher risks (Section 4). The implications of these concerns are expanded upon in the discussion (Section 5), and recommendations are made in the conclusion (Section 6). [5]

## 2. Potential Risks to Researchers

There has been discussion of the risks that researchers can encounter in the course of their work for some time now. From the early days of the Chicago School of Sociology, with its interest in conducting participant observation among "deviant" subcultures marked by violence (e.g., ADLER, 1985, GIULIANOTTI, 1995, LEE-TREWEEK & LINKOGLE, 2000a), to the development of theories of "emotionally engaged research" and "vicarious trauma" experienced by clinician, social work, feminist and other researchers whose work conjures stories of violence, abuse, and trauma (DICKSON-SWIFT et al., 2008; FAHS, PLANTE & McCLELLAND, 2017), researchers recognize that their work can be risky and are invested in discussing the implications of risky research. A variety of manuscripts and reports have outlined the dangers researchers can encounter in the field (e.g., BAHN & WEATHERILL, 2013; HOWELL, 1990; JACOBS, 2006; KOVATS-BERNAT, 2002; LEE, 1995; LEE-TREWEEK & LINKOGLE, 2000a; NILAN, 2002). Some of this work considers how field dangers might impact researchers' ethical responsibilities to their participants, for example, using deception or protecting incriminating data (e.g., CALVEY, 2000; JIPSON & LITTON, 2000), but such discussions have usually been framed as occupational health and safety concerns or as matters of social science methodology. Many have suggested that not only is a certain level of risk-taking necessary in order to examine certain questions, but that experiencing risk in the field can actually enhance our understanding and enrich the production of knowledge. Facing the hazards that are common to our participants, paying attention to our emotional responses to

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2 Private or semi-public events where sexual activity occurs onsite.

3 Bondage, discipline/dominant, submissive/sadist, masochist.

those situations—perhaps discomfort, distrust, or outright fear—and noting when and how our response differs from those of our participants is crucial to destabilizing our assumptions and understanding the context-specificity of risk perception (LEE-TREWEEK, 2000; PETERSON, 2000). The challenge of negotiating fieldwork is in knowing what degree of risk is required or useful relative to how valuable it will be to the research (LINKOGLE, 2000). [6]

A key edited volume on the issue, "Danger in the Field," claimed that "the issue of protecting researchers is often disregarded and has never been fashionable to think about or to discuss" (LEE-TREWEEK & LINKOGLE, 2000b, p.197). Indeed, when we conducted a small review of recent qualitative methodological textbooks, we found they rarely mentioned risks to researchers, at best listing potential concerns without offering meaningful discussion or possible solutions (e.g., CRANG & COOK, 2007; FETTERMAN, 2010; FIFE, 2005; GOBO, 2008; GRAY, 2002; LeCOMPTE & SCHENSUL, 2010; NASH, 2006; O'REILLY, 2012; TROMAN, JEFFREY & WALFORD, 2005). However, reference to the current practices of a few countries show that REBs are increasingly integrating the assessment of researcher risk into their procedures, albeit to varying degrees. A study of 37 Australian university REB protocols found that 13.5% of ethics applications specifically ask researchers to address their own physical, psychological, and/or emotional safety (DICKSON-SWIFT et al., 2005). When the Canadian Tri-Council Policy Statement, which governs all publically funded research involving human subjects, was most recently updated in, 2014, a brief section on "Researcher Risks" was included. The section recognizes that researchers—particularly student researchers, having less training and potentially subject to more pressures—may encounter harms ranging from "injury" to "incarceration." However, the statement goes on to assert that:

"While it is not a formal part of its responsibilities, an REB may raise concerns about the safety of student researchers as part of its communication to the student researchers, and to their supervisors. Based on the level of risk, the REB may consider referring these concerns for review by an appropriate body within the institution" (TCPS2, 2014, p.23). [7]

Similarly, the Central Office for Research Ethics Committees (COREC) form, which is the most common ethics form used in the UK, does inquire directly as to the "potential adverse effects, risks or hazards, pain, discomfort, distress or inconvenience" that the researcher may encounter; however, anecdotal research shows that the ethics departments of UK universities do not necessarily believe or behave as if researcher safety is one of their formal responsibilities, unless the potential risks are considerable (BLOOR et al., 2007, p.52). [8]

As to the specific harms that researchers may encounter, the UK-based Social Research Association lists the following:

- risk of physical threat or abuse;
- risk of psychological trauma as a result of actual or threatened violence or as a result of the nature of what is disclosed during the interaction;
- risk of being in a compromising situation in which there might be accusations of improper behavior;
- increased exposure to the risks of everyday life and social interaction, such as road accidents and infectious illness;
- risk of causing psychological or physical harm to others (DICKSON-SWIFT et al., 2008, p.135). [9]

These risks are usually discussed with the assumption that they must be managed. Perceived harms are to be minimized or prevented through strategies like having researchers work in pairs, developing safety plans, or equipping researchers with self-defense tools and tactics; or they are to be mitigated by providing resources such as counseling and debriefing (BAHN & WEATHERILL, 2013; JAMIESON, 2000; JIPSON & LITTON, 2000; LEE-TREWEEK, 2000). All of these risks and risk-reduction measures could be applicable to people conducting participatory sexuality research. For example, forms of bodily harm can occur when participating in BDSM practices. In other types of sex party practice, concern would primarily center around the possibility of sexual coercion or the contraction or transmission of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and HIV. To think critically about how these risks may be understood by REBs we must first examine how sexuality is imagined through the lens of sex exceptionalism. [10]

### **3. Sex Exceptionalism and Research Risks**

Cultural perceptions of bodies, power, and risk necessarily shape, and are in turn reaffirmed by, relevant regulatory frameworks such as the norms and practices of research ethics review. Sexuality implicates all three of these potent signifiers in important ways. Sexual practices are often considered especially "sacred," "intimate," or "delicate." This conviction hinges upon a rendering of sexual life that 1. privileges a narrow form of private, heteronormative, non-commercial, monogamous coupling (RUBIN, 1984), and 2. conceptualizes sexuality as inherently different than other forms of interaction and experience. In contrast to this framing, Stevi JACKSON and Sue SCOTT (2010) offer the following:

"We do not see sexuality as in any way foundational to the human condition or social order. Rather than seeing sexuality as the inner truth of our being or as the source of life's most meaningful experiences, we want to locate it within the mundane activities of social life. One of our central concerns is to challenge the 'specialness' of sexuality, the ways in which it is set apart from routine sociality" (pp.1-2). [11]

Many academics who study sexuality report that the perception that sex is "special" or "exceptional" contributes to experiences of stigma around their work.

Sexuality researchers, especially those who do qualitative work, have suggested that they are not valued or taken seriously as academics; that they encounter difficulty advancing in their careers; that they are swiftly accused of inappropriate or unethical conduct; and that their character, motivations, and methods are more deeply scrutinized than researchers in other fields (FAHS et al., 2017; IRVINE, 2014; THOMAS & WILLIAMS, 2016; VAN DEN HOONAARD, 2011). HAMMOND and KINGSTON (2014) argue that they experienced a transfer of sex worker stigma onto themselves by virtue of researching the sex trade. Janice IRVINE claims that this stigma is reflected in the academic apparatus by REBs, which unduly "apply tropes of danger and risk to projects involving sexuality" (2012, p.33). [12]

Might beliefs that sexuality is an innately sensitive and vulnerable subject inappropriately inform REB practice? While assessment of this question is sparse, taken as a whole these authors caution that sex exceptionalism may shape the way REBs imagine and understand potential risks to both participants and researchers when reviewing sex research. In regards to participants, normative judgments about sexuality frame research participants as necessarily vulnerable. Katherine FRANK (2015) writes that "some institutional review boards assume that asking *any* questions about a person's sexuality can potentially cause psychological distress, although this concern may reflect the individuals reviewing the research more than the actual risks" (p.136). IRVINE (2012) argues that sexually non-normative participants such as sex workers, queer folks, or kinksters<sup>4</sup> are often automatically deemed "vulnerable" in a way that construes these sex practices as inherently shameful and which equates "social discrimination with diminished autonomy" (p.32; see also GUSTAFSON & BRUNGER, 2014). [13]

The sexuality researchers that IRVINE (2012) surveyed reported that whereas REBs often demanded they make unreasonable therapeutic provisions, many of their research participants enjoyed participating in sex research and answering questions about their sexuality and sexual practice. Whether discussing sexuality is "distressful" largely depends on the norms or taboos of the people involved and the sexual subcultures they circulate within. Arguably, those who participate in non-private sexual practices, such as sex and BDSM parties, are less likely to be distressed by open discussion of their sexual life. Anecdotally, one of us (WEBBER) has found that her participants in research on sex practices consistently report their experience of participation as positive, and often voice appreciation for having the occasion to speak frankly about their perception of sexuality with an interested and non-judgmental interlocutor. The literature also suggests that completing questionnaires about sexuality does not generate significant distress, and often provides substantial benefit, even among youth and people with a history of sexual abuse (KUYPER, WIJSEN & DE WIT, 2014; KUYPER, DE WIT, ADAM & WOERTMAN, 2012; ROJAS & KINDER, 2007; SAVELL, KINDER & YOUNG, 2006). [14]

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4 People who engage in sexual practices viewed as non-normative, such as BDSM, fetishes, role play, or public sexuality.

Presumptions of risk and vulnerability, these authors argue, are applied to sexuality *researchers* as well. FAHS et al. (2017) assert that conducting qualitative sexuality research is inherently triggering to researchers as they may encounter stories of "pain, violence and sadness" that "tap into our own pain/violence/sadness and haunt us long after the interviews end" (p.8). IRVINE (2012) reports that sometimes REBs "view projects as too risky because they consider the researcher to be vulnerable. In these cases, the research subjects are deemed dangerous, typically because of non-normative identities or behaviors" (p.32). By way of example she cites sociologist Elisabeth SCHEFF, who was denied approval to conduct interviews in the homes of self-identified "kinky" respondents for the sake of her own safety in the face of assured kidnappings and torture<sup>5</sup>. HAMMOND and KINGSTON (2014) similarly report that in their work on the sex trade, REBs expressed paternalist concern for their safety. This concern was compounded, they argue, by their being women, and therefore considered especially emotionally and physically vulnerable. REB opinions such as these also depend upon the assumption that the danger posed by the research is novel or goes beyond that experienced in their everyday life. In short, when sex is viewed as an exceptional human activity, sex itself—especially non-dominant sexual expression—is imbued with a seemingly inherent sense of danger that, many suggest, might unduly influence the assessments of REB members. We now turn to a discussion of some considerations regarding the formal assessment of sexuality researcher risk, focusing on 1. how research risk compares to the risks inherent in everyday life, and 2. how potential harms compare to the anticipated benefits of the research. [15]

#### **4. Potential Ethical Dilemmas in the Review of Researcher Risk**

##### **4.1 Research risk compared to everyday life**

Is risk to researchers best understood within the context of the researcher's everyday life, as is the case with the assessment of risks to participants? Using the example of sex party research, this would require REBs to ask researchers to assess whether they would normally participate in the given activities outside of the research context. Certainly, assessing risk according to the researcher's everyday life has some logical appeal, because risk and danger are not objective states but rather "vary with the position of the actor in a particular social context" (PETERSON, 2000, p.181), and an activity may become dangerous if we are unaware of the rules or codes of conduct around it (PETERSON, 2000). However, this approach raises some challenges. [16]

First, how much detail is an REB entitled to ask about a researcher's everyday sexual experience to determine what risks are appropriate? Some consideration has been given to whether and why researchers conducting sexuality research should disclose their own sexual practices in their writing, but the discussion has

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5 Suggesting that researchers meet participants in public for researcher safety poses problems for sexuality research, where due to the socially unacceptable nature of frank sexual discussion—especially of non-normative practices—participants may prefer to meet in a safe and private space like their own home, as WEBBER's participants have indicated.



focused on methodology rather than ethics. For example, THOMAS and WILLIAMS (2016) recommend that sexuality researchers disclose more about their personal sexual desires in their writing to acknowledge the influence desire has upon the collection and interpretation of data. Whether explicit discussion of one's positionality as a researcher may be of methodological or analytical interest, it seems inappropriate to *require* this information in order to assess relative risk. For one, as LANKSHEAR (2000) points out, whereas disclosure in our writing can be helpful to other scholars, we are nevertheless entitled to privacy, for it can be personally and professionally dangerous to disclose how one's personal biography relates to or intertwines with one's research. This is especially the case if one's personal life does not conform to dominant sexual norms. Furthermore, asking researchers to disclose their sexuality in order to assess how the sexual risk of the research sits in relation to their regular life would imply that researchers are assumed to normally participate in a certain "low-risk" lifestyle (usually understood as heterosexual, monogamous, kink-free, relationship-based sex that presents no risk of sexually transmitted infections). [17]

Second, researchers' assessment of the risk entailed by their own work is extremely subjective, based largely off of previous experiences (BAHN & WEATHERILL, 2013), and they may inflate risk if they are unfamiliar with or carry biases around the subject they are investigating. Often, what is considered risky has less to do with statistical risk assessment and more to do with what is believed to be "exotic" (BREYER, 1993; cf. PETERSON, 2000); such beliefs are often informed by ethnocentric or classist presumptions (LINKOGLE, 2000; PETERSON, 2000). Heterosexism plays a similar role, and heteronormative notions of normalcy and safety may inform risk predictions. As we have argued elsewhere (WEBBER, BARTLETT & BRUNGER, 2016), the institutional treatment of sexualized infections like HIV does not reflect numerical risk as much as it does heterosexist anxieties. Such assumptions are admittedly found among those with the best of intentions and information. For example, HAMMOND and KINGSTON (2014) report that they assumed HAMMOND would encounter a certain level of emotional distress in conducting her research with men who purchase sex. They report that HAMMOND had therefore prepared herself by "reading research into sexual violence and male violence against women [that might] help her deal with uncomfortable and shocking narratives that both she and others assumed would arise" (p.334). She also chose her dress strategically to downplay her femininity and deflect possible sexual attention. However, she found that these preparations were largely unnecessary. They reflected her culturally bound stereotypes more than they did the reality of her research participants. It is therefore important to consider that researchers, supervisory committees, or REB members could have inflated, mistaken, or biased assumptions about the very risks that researchers would be asked to consent to. [18]

Third, and most importantly for the consideration of whether researcher risks can or should fall within the purview of REBs, researchers may underestimate risks because they perceive themselves to have had sufficient personal experience to know what to expect during the proposed research and do not envision potential

harms that they then encounter in the research context. REB members, if uninformed about a particular subcultural context and its associated risks, would also not envision the full range of potential harms. Given this, the extent to which research institutions are accountable when a researcher is harmed physically (or killed) in the context of risky research is an important consideration. [19]

#### **4.2 Balancing risks and benefits**

A second consideration is whether REBs should assess risks to the researcher in relation to the benefits of research, as is done with participant risk. Could this lead to double standards that uncritically uphold heteronormative sexual values? For example, imagine a project where a researcher wants to engage in participant observation at a local public sex cruising ground. One possible objective of such research would be to improve covert policing strategies with a goal of eradicating public sex venues. Another possible objective of such research would be to conduct an oral history of the cruising ground in order to illustrate the importance of public sex to queer culture. Depending on the value judgments of the REB members, one of these research objectives may be perceived as more beneficial. The determination of perceived benefit, and of what kinds of risks are justified in the pursuit of knowledge, is always a moral endeavor. If researcher risk is weighed in relation to perceived benefit, REBs would have to be highly conscious and self-critical of the moral preconceptions they may bring to the table. [20]

We are concerned that the research objectives and associated social benefits of sexuality research could be differently valued in ways that perpetuate sexually conservative or heteronormative worldviews. But more generally speaking, qualitative sexual research as a whole is not always taken as seriously or seen to be as vital as other methods of inquiry, as discussed above. If the method is undervalued, any knowledge derived thereof may be undervalued, and so any level of sexual risk-taking may seem unjustified or unnecessary in relation to the perceived (lack of) benefit. This would entail an unfair burden on researchers because of their chosen field. [21]

When it comes to determining risk-benefit balance, should there be room for negotiation if a researcher expresses their informed willingness (or indeed, their pleasure? See THOMAS and WILLIAMS, 2016) to be put at extreme or undue risk in the name of their research? If researchers actually take pleasure in the "risks" they will undertake (making them benefits, not "risks" from the researcher's point of view), should it be necessary that they disclose these potential "risk/benefits" to REBs to justify them in relation to benefits to society? [22]

## 5. Discussion

"Risk" is a highly mobile signifier, and in recent decades Euro-American cultures have become increasingly preoccupied with predicting risk, often taking for granted that society has a moral obligation to shield, and a moral right to be shielded from, risk of any sort. This facilitates use of the concept to advance ideological, economic, and political strategies (BOHOLM, 2003), making the idea of "risk" a potent moral construct. Labeling behaviors—especially sexual behaviors—as risky to one's physical, mental, or emotional health is a key means by which people and their presumed value systems are ordered, evaluated, and all too often, punished or pathologized. As Deborah LUPTON (1993) writes, "risk discourse is often used ... to express outrage at behavior deemed socially unacceptable, thereby exerting control over the body politic as well as the body corporeal" (p.425). Even when no *explicit* political agenda is being mobilized, underlying all risk discourse is the assumption that the "harms" in question are unwanted. If risk is simply the probability that something will occur, it is REBs (and risk assessment frameworks more broadly) that introduce the assumption that those things need to be managed, mitigated, or eliminated. [23]

A great deal of queer theory and activism, particularly around issues such as public sexuality and HIV, has addressed the ways in which heteronormative notions of obedience, propriety, and good citizenship influence perceptions of what constitutes "acceptable risk" and what should be "unwanted" (e.g., CALIFIA, 1994; DANGEROUS BEDFELLOWS, 1996; DEAN, 2009; PATTON, 1996; WARNER, 2000; WEBBER, 2017). This body of literature has thoughtfully interrogated what it means to undertake seemingly value-neutral risk analyses or to make risk assessments on behalf of others. Such investigations further beg the question of whether heteronormativity, or other dominant worldviews, may problematically inform REB assessment of risk more broadly. [24]

It is therefore important to remember that determining what constitutes "too much sexual risk" for a researcher is always a moral judgment. How "risky" a given practice feels to the researcher will depend in part on what sex practices they have engaged in, but also on the kind of sexual education, sexual behaviors, and socializing around sex that they have encountered in their lives. In the case of BDSM, for example, bondage, spanking, and other forms of impact play can result in "injuries" that are perhaps thought of as objectively harmful or painful, but may instead be experienced as a source of pleasure. As for STIs and HIV, even if a person does not normally engage in barrier-free penetrative sex, this may seem a more or less risky activity depending on their own HIV or STI status, their experience witnessing or talking about barrier-free sex, their familiarity speaking openly about HIV or STIs, the degree of intimacy they have with other people living with HIV and other STIs, and so on. "Risk" in any other field of research will be a similarly subjective experience. [25]

Taking too strict a stance on allowable researcher risk could infringe upon the quality of work produced. Certain risks simply cannot be eliminated without entirely compromising the research enterprise (WHITNEY, 2016). Not only that,

many of the essays in "Danger in the Field" (LEE-TREWEEK & LINKOGLE, 2000a) discuss different ways that research can be informed and enhanced by encounters with risk and danger, even (or perhaps especially) if such risks fall outside the researcher's everyday life. Risk is a part of the human experience, and engaging in the same risks as our participants can be an important point of access into their lives and an important way of knowing. If those risks happen to already be familiar to us, our personal experience may bring additional insights. In regards to sexuality research, some form of participation may be crucial to gaining acceptance and establishing rapport within the field site, and therefore essential to conducting true participant observation (PRIOR, 2013). When researching sexual cultures (or, arguably, any insular or stigmatized subcultures), it can be especially important to "blend in" lest participants feel uncomfortable, self-conscious, or judged in ways that could alter their typical behavior. In some cases, abstaining could disrupt field relations and create problematic divides between researchers and participants (FRANK, 2015), and participation in sexual practices can be justified in these terms. Indeed, some researchers have reported that their participation or genuine sexual interest has been used as a means to "test" the researcher's legitimacy and loyalty to the group under study (GOODE, 2002). Others have argued that academics, who are themselves members of the sexual subcultures they study, can "provide a more in-depth analysis of what is going on because they already know the language, the customs, the protocols, the layout of the land" (PRIOR, 2013, §13). The scholarly accounts they produce can therefore be especially insightful. [26]

Unanticipated risks and stresses can occur in all research. Researchers are generally left to their own devices in terms of establishing safety protocols beforehand or negotiating unanticipated risk in the field (DICKSON-SWIFT et al., 2008; JAMIESON, 2000; KOVATS-BERNAT, 2002; LETHERBY, 2000). This is partly due to the notion of research as an individualized pursuit, as well as concerns that requesting support is impractical, too expensive, or could be detrimental to one's professional reputation (LANKSHEAR, 2000; LEE-TREWEEK, 2000; LINKOGLE, 2000). Scholars writing on the subject typically advocate for some type of proactive guidance during graduate or even undergraduate training, or the establishment of more formalized support structures. These needs are typically framed as relevant methodological training (PETERSON, 2000) or as a matter of occupational health and safety (DICKSON-SWIFT et al., 2005, 2008; LEE-TREWEEK & LINKOGLE, 2000a). Adopting either framing would suggest that it is the educational institution—not the REB—that is the appropriate venue in which to convey guidelines around what researchers may wish to consider when embarking on their various research endeavors. Certainly, REBs are accused of being overly paternalistic as is (SCHRAG, 2011; VAN DEN HOONAARD, 2011). Yet some researchers nevertheless suggest that "University HRECs [human research ethics committees] need to be made explicitly aware of the risks faced by researchers who are undertaking social research, especially on sensitive topics. These committees need to factor these risks into their assessment of the ethical issues in research that they review" (DICKSON-SWIFT et al., 2008, p.142). Disagreement on the issue alludes to a larger question around the role REBs should have in fostering an ethical

sensibility among researchers. Because they were originally created to address the concerns of biomedical research, REBs are not always well designed to be able to provide substantive ethical commentary upon qualitative work (SCHRAG, 2011). As a result, REBs may even trivialize ethical questions by employing bureaucratic procedures that focus too heavily on administrative elements like consent documents at the expense of encouraging or enabling more profound examination of ethical dilemmas (VAN DEN HOONAARD, 2011). Entrusting and expecting REBs to absorb additional roles in the risk assessment process is therefore misguided. REB procedure is crucial, but it cannot be used to replace the deeper, extended process of ethical training and reflexivity that is needed to produce a sense of moral responsibility within researchers. Cultivation of this sensibility is important, as qualitative researchers often need to negotiate situations in the field that no one, REBs included, can predict. [27]

## 6. Conclusion

It is unclear to what extent globally REBs concern themselves with assessing the risk that a research project poses to researchers. A brief look at Australia, Canada, and the UK shows that institutions increasingly recognize and assess researcher risk, but few have adopted standardized regulations or requirements. Many scholars have argued that we need to train researchers in how to predict, mitigate, or capitalize upon the risks they may encounter (e.g., DICKSON-SWIFT et al., 2008; LEE-TREWEEK & LINKOGLE, 2000a). Some argue further that REBs should be formally involved in that process (DICKSON-SWIFT et al., 2005, 2008). [28]

In contrast, we believe that if adopted, the production and enactment of risk guidelines should be limited to the pedagogical relationships within the educational institution, or to institutional requirements for workplace safety, not REBs. Involving REBs in the assessment of what constitutes acceptable risk for a researcher (sexual or otherwise) both empowers and burdens REBs inappropriately. Assessing what level of sexual risk-taking is appropriate or acceptable is an essentially subjective decision, contingent upon personal preferences and boundaries, value systems or moral stances, and degrees of knowledge and skill surrounding different sexual practices. It is thus recommended that REBs not be given jurisdiction over determining whether or not research that involves engaging in sexual practice poses too great a risk to the researcher(s). Unless the research methods pose substantial risk to participants, any determination of what constitutes "acceptable risk" is potentially problematic. [29]

Further, we feel that if specialized risk training is adopted, it should not be restricted to those engaging in "sensitive research" but should be a universal requirement. Otherwise, institutional bodies are entitled to determine which research fields or topics they consider "sensitive" or "risky" enough to merit extra training. Any kind of fieldwork can result in stressful or uncomfortable situations that require diplomacy and grace, simply by virtue of involving human interactions. Furthermore, all forms of research, regardless of methodology, are

time-consuming and can be stressful, isolating, and exhausting. Determining which topics are "sensitive" is a selective and subjective process. [30]

As REB assessment of researcher risk is not yet a routine process, we have tried in this article to preemptively identify some points of consideration and concern. In assessing any kind of risk (whether to participant or researcher), REBs should consider the ways in which they may conflate risk, harm, and the undesirability of harm and concomitant need to manage it. We have illustrated how sex exceptionalism and heteronormative values may problematically encourage this conflation in REB assessments of risk to researchers conducting participatory sexuality research. We hope this discussion will inform and inspire thinking about how other dominant ideologies may influence REB assessment of other types of risk that researchers may encounter. [31]

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## Authors

**Valerie WEBBER** is a PhD student in community health and humanities at Memorial University of Newfoundland. She holds degrees in sexuality studies, medical anthropology, and public health, with an interest in the intersections of health, power, and sexual marginalization. Her doctoral research examines the use of public health rhetoric in popular and political discourse around pornography. Her recent publications include, with R. SULLIVAN, "Constructing a Crisis: Porn Panics and Public Health" (part of a special section they co-edited for *Porn Studies*, 2018) and "'I'm Not Gonna Run Around and Put a Condom on Every Dick I See': Tensions in Safer Sex Activism Among Queer Communities in Montréal, Quebec" (*Sexuality & Culture*, 2017).

Contact:

Valerie Webber

Division of Community Health and Humanities,  
Faculty of Medicine  
Memorial University of Newfoundland  
St. John's, Newfoundland and Labrador,  
Canada, A1B 3V6

Tel.: +1 709-864-6677

Fax: +1 709-864-4991

E-mail: [valerie.webber@mun.ca](mailto:valerie.webber@mun.ca)

**Fern BRUNGER** is professor of health care ethics in the Faculty of Medicine at Memorial University of Newfoundland. She is a medical anthropologist and ethicist with an active research agenda at the interface of bioethics and anthropology. She examines science, medicine, and bioethics as cultural systems, considering culture in its relation to power.

Contact:

Dr. Fern Brunger

Division of Community Health and Humanities,  
Faculty of Medicine  
Memorial University of Newfoundland  
St. John's, Newfoundland and Labrador,  
Canada, A1B 3V6

Tel.: +1 709-864-6677

Fax: +1 709-864-4991

E-mail: [fbrunger@mun.ca](mailto:fbrunger@mun.ca)

URL: <http://www.faculty.mun.ca/fbrunger/>

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